

# **Reversion to Islam in Perth, Australia - Experiences, challenges & recommended strategic solutions**

**By Idris (Andrew) La Terra**

## **Introduction**

Assalamu alaikum my names is Andrew La Terra, I have taken Idris as my Muslim name. I was born in Melbourne, Australia. Raised as a Catholic by immigrant parents. My father is Italian & my mother is Norwegian. I'm 38 years old & single.

Professionally I work as a entrepreneur in the natural healthcare industry. I'm a Clinical Naturopath & Formulation Scientist, working at developing new herbal medicine & health products for the nutraceutical & pharmaceutical industry.

## **Reversion to Islam**

Since the age of 21 I have been interested in God, I had decided that the Catholic faith I was raised in didn't seem truthful, and have since spent the last 16 years researching God. I attended many different Christian churches & bible studies. The more I read & researched the more I saw flaws in the christian faith. I even briefly researched the Jewish faith, finding the same confusion that I had found in Christianity.

Before my introduction to Islam I had never personally known any Muslims and my understanding about Islam was only that I thought it was a religion of grumpy Arabs (no offence).

In February 2018 I was in Singapore for a short business trip. During a tour of the city I came across the beautiful Sultan Masjid. Like most tourists I started taking photos of this beautiful building, as I had never seen a Mosque before. As I started taking photos, the Azan started. I was overcome with emotions and started crying, I had never heard the Azan before, I still remember hearing for the first time "ashadu an la ilaha illa-llah" not knowing what it meant, but somehow those words touched my heart profoundly and brought me to tears.

I noticed people started walking into the Mosque and I asked my two business companions (two Singaporean women, who I later found out were actually Muslims) if I could go inside and look. They lead me inside and I watched in amazement the group of men praying. Something about the purity of their worship of God, watching men of different cultures, skin colour & backgrounds joined together in sujud touched me. After my emotional experience, I asked my Muslim business companions how I could learn more about Islam. Later that afternoon, Ais one of my business friends organised me to meet her uncle, and the following day he took me to the Muslim Convert Association where I was able to ask questions, was given some reading material and taught the basic outline of Islamic beliefs. Unfortunately I only had two days left in Singapore, and I regret not having more time, because their resources at the Muslim Converts Association were amazing.

When I returned home to Australia, I actually relocated from Melbourne to Perth, and felt an interest in Islam still burned inside of me, so I googled "Muslim Perth" and found the details to the Perth Mosque. When I called the number listed by google I found the number had

been disconnected, so I decided to go there in person, luckily the Imam was there and I was able to continue my learning about Islam. After two visits, Sheikh Mohammed Shakeeb asked if I was ready to take the Shahada. I said I needed to think about it, and he invited me to come to the Mosque that Friday for Jummah. That Friday was the Christian Easter celebration of Good Friday. As I woke that morning I realised unlike every other year throughout my life, I didn't want to go to church to celebrate something I didn't believe anymore, so I contacted the Imam and said that even though it's the Christian Good Friday I had decided that I didn't want to go to church, so instead I'll go to the Mosque, his reply still makes me laugh till this day "Every Friday is Good". I said my Shahada Friday 30th March 2018 at Perth Mosque after Jummah prayer and afterwards was warmly greeted by my new brothers in Islam.

### **Experience of a new Muslim in Perth**

I have found a complete lack of support, education, training and resources since my reversion to Islam here in Perth. Individual people have helped me by answering questions, offering friendship, and guiding my new way of life & religion, which I am very grateful for, their friendship is sincere and has been much appreciated.

However as a organization or institution "Islam within Perth" has failed me, as a brand new revert, and I feel others have faced the same problem.

Interestingly I have had several discussions with people who were born in Muslim families, and are asking me where they can learn more about Islam, or learn how to read Arabic, as they lack the knowledge themselves. Some are immigrants, particularly from Afghanistan & Iran others have grown up here in Australia. Clearly people are hungry for education & instruction but don't know where to find it, or have tried & haven't had any success.

To advance my understanding of Islam, learn how to say my prayers and learn Islamic customs I have attempted to visit, contact & speak with the following groups & people to assist my education as a new revert:

#### **Mosques & Sheikh's:**

Most Mosques don't have a easy or direct point of communication, often phone numbers aren't correct, calls aren't answered or messages returned. You just simply have to show up & try to find someone to help you. Most Sheikh's I have contacted or spoken to in Perth, don't have a solution to help me with my Islamic education. They often suggest I keep a lookout for upcoming classes or events, or visit YouTube to learn salat or arabic. I feel most Sheikh's are too busy or not equipped or able to teach individual students like myself.

#### **Islamic Schools:**

Schools cater to children's education needs, and don't have the resources to educate adults in Islam. The schools I contacted suggested I contact my local Mosque which I have.

#### **University Islamic groups & Musallahs:**

I attempted to contact two university Islamic groups, without any success. I also attempted to visit UWA campus musallah but it was locked & required a

code to enter. I was given the contact number of a Sheikh responsible for Muslim students but he never returned my call or message.

**Facebook groups:**

I have joined & contacted several Islamic Facebook groups in Perth. Some of the groups needed me to validate that I was a Muslim, but in terms of getting advice where I can go to learn more about Islam & Arabic for my salat, I haven't had any success there either.

**Advertisted events or classes:**

I have contacted several events & classes I have seen advertised around online or in Mosques. The outcome has been the same, most classes or events require you to be able to read arabic, or have a mature understanding of Islam as they cover deeper topics which are not suitable for new reverts to Islam.

No Islamic or Arabic classes exist for new adult reverts who can't read Arabic as all are for children or teenagers. Some exist for Sisters, but again they often require an understanding of the Arabic alphabet.

Furthermore there are no classes or events for people investigating Islam, people who are wanting to know more about our faith.

**Bookstore & Islamic Association:**

To my surprise Perth does not have a single Islamic shop, bookstore or resource centre. No one sells Islamic books, clothing or materials, which I feel is a missed opportunity.

I made contact & visited the Islamic Association of WA, no one returned my call, or messages & when I visited, it was empty & could be used only as a musallah and the classes and events I found advertised there were as I mentioned above, either for children, teenagers, or sisters who could already read Arabic.

**Global Ikhwan Community:**

So far the only success I have had is from an unlikely place, Love & Care Cafe at 38 Pier Street, Perth. This is a very warm & kind Malay community called Global Ikhwan, they are a community that work together in their businesses and interestingly live together as a big family in several locations. They educate their children, and try to live a halal lifestyle. I have visited their cafe, villa, farm. They have been assisting me when possible, once a week to learn basic Islamic principles & pronounce some arabic for salat. I have developed a good friendship with their leadership, and I believe they would be willing to assist in future opportunities to help other reverts in the future, but currently don't have any structure for that, and any resources they currently have are in the Malay language.

**Problems & Solutions**

As you can see from my attempts above, I have encountered several problems with learning the basics about Islam. For a new revert to Islam several fundamental things need to be taught & understood. This instruction is very important because without this basic knowledge, speaking from experience you can feel lost when visiting Mosques, socialising

with Muslim brothers & sisters, and more importantly not perfecting or understanding your salat, and in some individual cases without proper support I feel some of our brothers & sisters might feel isolated, confused & uncertain, and this may lead to them losing their interest in Islam and eventually not practising or even regretting their decision to be a Muslim in the first place.

I feel the list below outlines, from my humble opinion areas and priorities needed to educate people who are new reverts to Islam. I feel we also have a obligation to help those who lack the experience & education even from Muslim families:

### **Areas of help & education needed for reverts:**

#### **1. Learn & understand the 5 pillars of Islam:**

I believe a new revert to Islam needs to understand the fundamental believes in Islam firstly, if he/she starts with this as their foundation it will only support everything else they will learn about Islam. A lack of knowledge here is like not preparing a foundation for a new building, which will eventually collapse.

#### **2. Learn how to recite & pronounce the Shahada in Arabic:**

When saying the Shahada for the first time as a revert, you don't fully understand what is being said, and the pronunciation in Arabic is difficult as it's a new language for you. I struggled with saying the shahada correctly myself for sometime. It's so fundamental to our faith, and is used in salat, azan etc. I think after they have a good understanding of the basics, the first thing a new revert should be assisted with is perfecting the pronunciation of the shahada.

#### **3. Understand what is halal & haram; food, lifestyle etc:**

Islam is not just a religion, its a way of life, and much confusion can exist for a new revert what is acceptable & what is not. Being taught from the beginning what is halal and haram, assists the new revert with lifestyle changes in all the many different aspect of one's life, such as food, clothing, personal grooming, alcohol, intimate relationships etc.

#### **4. Learn how to make intentions & dua in your heart:**

It personally took me sometime before I understood what is dua & how to make intentions in your heart. For example I didn't know that I could just "pray" in my heart to Allah SWT whenever I wanted or needed too, I thought the only prayer in Islam was the five salat we say each day. As we know intention should be the focus of everything we do in Islam, so this is an important step to learn for a new revert.

#### **5. Learn how perform Ghusl & Wudu:**

Before saying my Shahada the Imam asked me to take a full shower. I didn't understand the importance of this. Making wudu is a beautiful part of our faith, and it took me sometime before I understood the significance of doing it & the correct method.

#### **6. Understand the times, postures & customs in salat:**

Our salat is something we practice a minimum of 5 times a day, every day. For a new revert, especially while not knowing the Arabic words used in salat, understanding the times, postures & other customs used in salat is the first step. For me personally, I found it stressful not understanding the rhythm of salat postures, when to do what &

how many times etc, I wasn't accustomed to kneeling or sitting on the floor, all this took sometime before I knew how to follow the steps & postures used in salat & felt comfortable with it. Once I understood it, it was helpful when I was alone at home, I could go through the steps of salat myself without saying the words, but at least I felt I had completed what was obligatory.

**7. Learn customs & practices of visiting a Mosque, and praying Jummah:**

Visiting a mosque for a new revert can be exciting experience filled with nerves and anxiety simply because he/she doesn't know what to do. Understanding especially how to join jummah prayer is important, as well as customs & practices you should observe in Mosques.

**8. Learn the Arabic used in prayer, how to recite personal salat, especially Al-Fatiha:**

Arabic for most new reverts is a foreign & strange language, and is probably the most daunting part of becoming a Muslim. This in particular is the area I have struggled with the most, and still do to this day. I personally have tried several routes to get instruction with saying my salat in Arabic, and still haven't found a suitable solution. I still can't say the full salat in Arabic, only knowing small sections of it.

YouTube videos, prayer mats, books & posters exist with the transliteration of the words of salat, but this just isn't suitable because Arabic is such a unique language with sounds & tones foreign to an English speaker, it really requires personal instruction to correct mistakes & aid the learning process.

Furthermore most transliterations aren't that helpful because the letters used don't accurately represent the sounds you're trying to make. Furthermore I have met many Muslims in Perth that also struggle with this.

**9. Learn & understand Islamic expressions, such as assalamu alaikum, inshallah, alhamdulillah etc:**

Not an overly important topic, yet the first thing you notice when you become a new Muslim is your Muslim brothers & sisters frequently saying phrases and words that are just foreign to you, for example I thought "inshallah" meant "I'll see you later".

**10. Learn how to locate & understand authentic hadith, and seek guidance when faced with questions:**

Since I have been a new revert to Islam many people, out of kindness have offered suggestions, and opinions about a broad range of topics to me, and I think this must be common for other reverts. You overcome with people's opinions & often don't know what is what.

Everything from saving up for a dowry to get married, not visiting my mother because she has dogs, changing my hairstyle because it's haram, the suggestion I should practice polygamy so I can have a big family, not doing wudu in my own bathroom because it has a toilet, not eating food prepared by non-Muslims even if it's halal, not taking selfies on my phone, that I don't need to wash my feet when I do wudu if I haven't taken my socks off since my last wudu, etc. It seems almost on a daily basis new topics arise, and not having a source to locate authentic advice can be frustrating & confusing.

**11. Learning the Arabic alphabet & starting to read the Quran in Arabic:**

Probably the final step for any Muslim's education once the basics have been covered is reading the holy Quran in Arabic, and memorising surahs. English

translations clearly don't reflect the beauty of the Quran in the original arabic. Most arabic classes I have found are for children & teenagers, or people who can already read Arabic & know the alphabet. In my experience most of the Muslims I have met all need some assistance with this, and they have a eagerness to learn, but very few resources exist in Perth.

### **Suggestions & recommendations:**

I believe we have an opportunity to make some big progress with assisting new reverts & others who struggle with some of the basics in Islam, wither it's perfecting their salat, arabic or being able to read the Quran.

I can't help but reflect on my two days in Singapore when I visited the Muslim Converts Association, their resources were amazing, they have library, bookstore, musallah, classrooms, and a long list of short & detailed clases teaching everything for anyone wanting to learn more about Islam, investigators into Islam, reverts & matured Muslims. Something like this doesn't happen overnight, and takes considerable resources to start & maintain, but I believe we can start small and inshallah we can offer a great service to our Muslim community in Perth, those seeking the truth of Islam for the glory of Allah SWT.

I see three action strategies that we can work towards:

#### **1. Association or organisation:**

I'm not fully aware of the organisation, structure or resources available to Islam Australia as a group, but I believe we need a dedicated organisation with a dedicated members, focused on delivering education & resources to the people of Perth. This may require using Islam Australia's current structure or starting a new association that can model itself on similar groups like what I experienced in Singapore with the Muslim Converts Association.

#### **2. Structured dawah program, new revert mentor management & courses:**

From what I have experienced the single most important thing missing in Perth is structure.

An organised structured program & system designed to introduce new people to Islam, help educate new reverts & our brothers & sisters seeking more education & Islamic knowledge based on the above mentioned as "**Areas of help & education needed for reverts**".

This requires a goal focused organisational structure with key individuals dedicated to specific areas of responsibilities, and a clear revert mentor management protocol. Furthermore to support our goals, we need courses, content, individuals & resources that can deliver the needed education & help the progression of new reverts as noted above.

#### **3. Bookstore, Classroom, Musallah & Cafe:**

One of the problems I foresee is the lack of a dedicated location, a single place where people can go for this help, and the people who can manage & execute these goals. I understand this is a daunting idea, but I believe inshallah, we will find the financial means necessary to achieve our goals.

I believe must secure a location that can offer the following resources & activities under the direction of a paid dedicated staff & volunteers, and at the same time be a financially independent organisation:

**1. Islamic bookstore & resources shop:**

I think a city like Perth not having a single Islamic bookstore, where people can purchase Islamic books, Qurans, prayer mats, clothing etc is a big disappointment & a missed opportunity. Not only does this support the needs of the local Muslim community, but as a business it can financially support the goals of the association, our dawah efforts & education.

**2. Classroom:**

Having a dedicated classroom where people can attend different classes & talks is essential, needed for our overall vision, without it our dawah efforts are almost a waste, and lacks the ongoing support so importantly needed. Certain classes can be free of charge and others can be paid classes, or by donation, further supporting the goals of the larger organisation.

**3. Musallah:**

There are limited places to make wudu and dedicated prayer areas in our city, having a dedicated musallah brings the community together for salat & will also support new reverts as a place to learn & perfect their salat with proper direction.

**4. Cafe:**

Having a place that brings people together for a coffee, tea or halal snacks & food will not only strengthen the local community but also the financial needs of the association & its overall mission.

### **Conclusion**

Being an entrepreneur I can't help but see the world through business opportunities, I see things and see opportunities for improvement. Although this is not a business venture, I think my skills & business experience matched with my life experience as a new revert gives me a unique opportunity to assist in creating something to really bless our Muslim community of Perth, the practice of our deen for the glory of Allah SWT and I'm willing to assist how I can to ensure the dawah efforts & education in Perth is brought to a level deserving of our beautiful faith inshallah.